

Norton to Showcase African-American Artists During Black History Month

RECENT ACQUISITIONS OF WORKS BY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS NJIDEKA AKUNYILI CROSBY, WILLIE COLE, AND MICKALENE THOMAS WILL BE ON VIEW

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida (Jan. 5, 2017) – The forthcoming Norton Museum of Art exhibition *Spotlight: Recent Acquisitions* celebrates Black History Month through showcasing stellar artwork by living black artists that became part of the Norton collection during the past year. Works on view include *Super Blue Omo*, a new painting by Nigerian born Njideka Akunyili Crosby; a series of photographs and a sculpture by Willie Cole; and a major painting by Mickalene Thomas, *Naomi Looking Forward # 2*, 2016. The focus exhibition runs from Feb. 2 – March 5, 2017. Cole will discuss his work during a public presentation at the Norton at 3 p.m. on Feb. 12, 2017.

Super Blue Omo, 2016, by Akunyili Crosby is a major work in her signature style. The Nigerian-born artist studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and Yale University and has received an extraordinary response to her figurative paintings since her exhibition last year at the Norton, *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: I Refuse to be Invisible*, part of the Museum's Recognition of Art by Women (RAW) series. Her composition and palette address formal concerns and, even, art historical references. Distinct to her practice is the laborious process of transferring photographs to animate passages of her paintings. Taken primarily from family photographs and Nigerian pop culture reproduced in magazines and online, she uses images of Nigerian stars, government officials, historical ceremonies, and contemporary cultural figures in a patchwork, dotted with images from her own family history.

Super Blue Omo reveals the latest challenge set up by the artist, a composition with a solitary figure, which references the artist's sister. Larger than life, the figure quietly confronts the viewer while anticipating a visitor for tea, evident by the nearby kettle and two cups (decorated with the artist's wedding photo.) Despite the work's technical challenge, she has created a psychological and emotional atmosphere -- the universal experience of longing, being "blue." It is, like all her work, open for more than one interpretation, as are her titles, which have both literal and poetic meaning. While the artist's choice of *Super Blue Omo* references a popular detergent brand in Nigeria – "omo" is also an affectionate, vernacular term for child or a sudden surprise, perhaps visualized in this composition as the anxious moments before the beginning of a reunion.

American-born artist Willie Cole is perhaps best known for using domestic implements, especially bicycles and old steam irons in his work. He was first recognized in the mid-1980s for creating two-dimensional works that were the result of scorching fabric or ironing board pads, with an imprint burned by the iron. The result: patterns that were both abstract and symbolic, suggesting the domestic servitude by many African Americans and the scarring of black bodies, whether as signs of beauty or the result of physical punishment. In works such as *American Beauty*, from 1989, Cole evokes the appearance of a

traditional African sculpture suggesting not only its inspiration to the development of Cubism and such modern artists as Picasso and Braque, but also the previously exclusive definition of American beauty – blonde, white-skinned females.

Ideas about feminine beauty and, especially black beauty, and the subjugation of women are considered by Mickalene Thomas in her photographs and collaged reliefs on wood. Using oil and acrylic paint, enamel, silkscreen, and collaged elements, it was her bold incorporation of brilliant, sparkling rhinestones which became a signature element. Yet, concentrating on this “bling” factor ignores Thomas’ rigorous exploration of the fractured space of modernism and a commentary on the economic status suggested by the selection of interior design elements.

The artificial and real are in play throughout *Naomi Looking Forward #2*, which features a beautiful black woman, supermodel Naomi Campbell, lounging across the entire work. She is in the pose of an odalisque made familiar in the renderings of elongated, female nudes by the early 19th-century French artist, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. Thomas pays homage to Ingres by superimposing a photo detail suggesting the Turkish origin of the odalisque for her figure’s legs strewn across a sofa that morphs from comfy to an angular, modernist design. The Norton is proud to include the works of these important and influential artists in its collection of contemporary art and thrilled to exhibit them during Black History Month.

ABOUT THE NORTON MUSEUM

Founded in 1941, the Norton Museum of Art is recognized for its distinguished holdings in American, European, and Chinese art, and a continually expanding presence for Photography and Contemporary art. Its masterpieces of 19th century and 20th century European painting and sculpture include works by Brancusi, Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, and American works by Stuart Davis, Hopper, O’Keeffe, Pollock, and Sheeler.

The Norton presents special exhibitions, lectures, tours, and programs for adults and children throughout the year. In 2011, the Norton launched RAW (Recognition of Art by Women), featuring the work of a living female painter or sculptor and funded by the Leonard and Sophie Davis Fund/MLDauray Arts Initiative. In 2012, the Norton established the biennial, international Rudin Prize for Emerging Photographers in partnership with Beth Rudin DeWoody, named in honor of her late father, Lewis Rudin.

In 2016, the Norton broke ground for a visionary expansion designed by architecture firm Foster + Partners, under the direction of Pritzker Prize-winning architect Lord Norman Foster. The project reorients the Norton’s entrance to the main thoroughfare of South Dixie Highway, restoring the symmetry of the museum’s original 1941 design, and includes a new 42,000-square-foot West Wing that doubles education space, and increases gallery space for the Norton’s renowned collection. The transformation of the Museum’s 6.3-acre campus will create a museum in a garden, featuring new, verdant spaces and a sculpture garden.

The Norton is located at 1451 S. Olive Ave. in West Palm Beach, FL., and during construction through December 2018 is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. and Thursday, noon to 9 p.m., and is **free to the public**. The Museum is closed on Mondays and major holidays. For additional information, please call (561) 832-5196, or visit www.norton.org.

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